

# *U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Squadron Designations and Abbreviations*

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The system of squadron designations was established to help define part of Naval Aviation's organizational structure and help identify the operational and administrative functions of aviation within the fleet. Just as the designations for ships, such as DD, CA, BB, etc., were used to define the duties of the specific units and their alignment within the fleet organization, so also were the squadron designations established to formulate the responsibilities and alignment within Naval Aviation and the fleet structure.

During Naval Aviation's early years, due to the limited capabilities of the aircraft there were big question marks concerning Naval Aviation's ability to succeed as a functional component of the fleet and whether it even would survive. In official publications and references, such as the Daily Aviation News Bulletin of 1 October 1919, casual terms were used to describe or identify various aircraft squadrons and units. The casual terms were used because no specific fleet aviation organizational structure for squadrons had been officially established. Prior to 1919, naval aircraft, excluding Marine Corps planes, were assigned primarily to shore stations. Therefore, in order to integrate aviation into the fleet, it was necessary to develop a fleet organization that included aviation units.

On 17 July 1920, the Secretary of the Navy prescribed a standard nomenclature for types and classes of naval vessels, including aircraft, in which lighter-than-air craft were identified by the type "Z" and heavier-than-air craft by the letter "V". Class letters assigned within the Z type were R, N and K for rigid dirigibles, non-rigid dirigibles and kite balloons respectively, while F, O, S, P, T and G were established for fighter, observation, scouting, patrol, torpedo and bombing, and Fleet planes as classes within the V type. The use of the "V" designation with fix-wing heavier-than-air squadron designations has been a question of debate since the 1920s. However, no conclusive evidence has been found to identify why the letter "V" was chosen. It is generally believed the "V" was in reference to the French word *volplane*. As a verb, the word means to glide or soar. As a noun, it described an aeronautical

device sustained in the air by lifting surfaces (wings), as opposed to the bag of gas that the airships (denoted by "Z") used. The same case may be made regarding the use of "Z". It is generally believed the "Z" was used in deference to Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin, the German general and developer of the airship in 1900. However, documentation has not been located to verify this assumption.

In general terms, the Navy's system for designating naval aircraft squadrons has usually conformed to the following loose classification structure:

(1) Squadron designations were based on specific letters used for indicating the missions for each particular type of squadron and its assigned aircraft. As an example, a World War II squadron operating the F4U Corsair aircraft would have been designated a fighting squadron (VF). The letter F, for fighting or fighter, was the key in identifying the type of squadron and was also used in the aircraft's designation.

(2) Identification numbers were assigned to each squadron, such as VF-1. The number 1 separates Fighter Squadron 1 (VF-1) from Fighter Squadron 10 (VF-10).

There have been many variations to this basic system throughout Naval Aviation's history. Changes were also made to the designation system when new plane types were developed and new squadrons were formed to carry out those new missions. There is no logical sequence for the numerical designation assigned the various squadrons throughout most of Naval Aviation's history. The Marine Corps did establish a logical sequence for their squadron designations, however, there are variations to this system, too.

As Navy squadrons were established, disestablished, or redesignated, many of the same letters and numbers were reused and assigned at a later date for newly-established or redesignated units, hence, the lineage of a squadron cannot always be traced or linked by using the same designation. As an example, VF-1 from World War II has no direct relationship to VF-1 established in the 1970s. The rich tradition and heritage of the various squadrons in the Navy has not always been carried

over because of the break in continuity between units. Once a squadron is disestablished that ends its history. If a new squadron is established using the same designation of a previous squadron, it does not have any direct relationship with that unit. The reuse of many of the same letters and numerical designations adds considerable confusion to the squadron designation system. A new squadron may carry on the traditions of a previous squadron, just as a ship that has been assigned the name used by a previous ship, carries on the traditions of the past ships with the same name. However, a squadron, just like a ship, cannot claim a heritage or historical link to the old unit with the same designation.

Consistency has been the major ingredient lacking in the Navy's squadron designation system. As an example, the use of "Plane" in squadron designations was not consistent during the 1920s. Sometimes the full designation would be written differently, depending on the squadron's assignment to the Battle Fleet, Scouting Fleet, or Asiatic Fleet. A designation such as Scouting Squadron and Scouting Plane Squadron, which used the same abbreviation, VS, was listed in the *Navy Directory* as Scouting Squadron under the Battle Fleet and Scouting Plane Squadron under the Scouting Fleet. The use of "Plane" in squadron designations was most likely designed to identify the squadron as an aviation unit, vice a destroyer squadron. This seems to be especially true during the 1920s when aviation was first being integrated into the fleet organization and operations. The *Navy Directory*, *Monthly Report*, *Status of Naval Aircraft*, and the *Bureau of Aeronautics*, *Weekly Newsletter* all list squadron designations using "Plane." The Chief of Naval Operations' "Naval Aeronautical Organization", published for each Fiscal Year, lists the squadron designations without using "Plane" in the designation. It is obvious there is no difference between the squadrons with or without the use of "Plane" in the squadron designation. The acronym remained the same, with or without the use of "Plane" in the full squadron designation. In the 1930s the squadron designations listed in all four sources identified above usually refer to the squadron using its abbreviated designation, such as VF Squadron 1 (VF-1) instead of Fighting Plane Squadron 1. In the 1940s the use of "Plane" in the full squadron designation was dropped.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s the VC squadron designation was used to identify a group of squadrons with several different missions but all assigned the VC designation. Missions for specific Composite Squadrons (VC) included all-weather night, attack and defense; air early warning; anti-submarine warfare; and photographic. The only identifying factor to separate the different types of Composite Squadrons was the numerical designation. In the late 1940s the single digit numbers were for the Composite Night or Attack and Defense units, those numbers in the teens were for Composite Air

Warning squadrons, numbers in the 20s and 30s were for Composite Anti-Submarine units, and the numbers in the 60s were for Composite Photographic squadrons.

Besides the composite squadrons (VC), several patrol squadrons (VP) had specific mission requirements that were different from its normal patrol and reconnaissance duties. However, these squadrons still maintained the normal VP designation. In the late 1940s there were two VP squadrons with a primary mission of photographic and one with an air early warning mission. VP-61 and VP-62 were the photographic squadrons and VP-51 was the air early warning squadron.

The special VC and VP designated units, were on the cutting edge of technology, which eventually lead to the development of specialized squadron designations in the 1950s and 1960s. Squadrons such as VAW (Carrier Airborne Early Warning), VAQ (Tactical Electronic Warfare), and VQ (Electronic Counter-measures or Air Reconnaissance) were the result of technical developments in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The use of an abbreviated squadron designation with different missions occurred in the early 1950s when the VJ designation was used for both photographic squadrons and weather squadrons. VJ-1 and 2 were designated Weather Squadrons or Weather Reconnaissance Squadrons. VJ-61 and 62 were designated Photographic Squadrons. The missions were totally different for these two types of squadrons but they used a common abbreviated squadron designation.

There are four factors that play a role in developing or changing squadron designations. They have been around since the introduction of aviation in the Navy and will continue to be the primary factors effecting squadron designations. The factors are:

1. the duties or mission of a squadron
2. technical advances in aircraft or equipment
3. changes in tactics or development of new tactics
4. changes in Naval Aviation or fleet organization

The following is a list of various squadron designations used by the Navy since the early 1920s. The list is in alphabetical order rather than in the chronological order of squadron development. The general time frame for when the designation was in use is listed with most of the squadron designations. Further elaboration on the assignment of squadrons to other organizations and their designations such as: a battle group, carrier air wing, cruiser group, fleet air force, Scouting Fleet, Asiatic Fleet, naval district, reserves, etc. . . . , has not been included in this list to prevent it from becoming too confusing or extensive. The only exception to this is for the reserves. Reserve squadron designations, beginning in 1970, are included in this list. In 1970 the naval air reserve was reorganized and the squadron structure and arrangement was aligned to mirror the squadron designation system in existence for active fleet units.

**U.S. NAVY SQUADRON DESIGNATIONS/ABBREVIATIONS**

<i>Acronym</i>	<i>Full Squadron Designation</i>	<i>General time-frame in use</i>
BLIMPHEDRON	LTA Headquarters Squadron	1943–1946
BLIMPRON	LTA Squadron	1942–1961
BLPHEDRON	Blimp Headquarters Squadron	1943–1946
BLPRON	Blimp Squadron	1942–1961
FASRON	Fleet Aircraft Service Squadron	1946–1960
HAL or HA(L)	Helicopter Attack Squadron Light	1967–1972 1976–1988
HC	Helicopter Combat Support Squadron	1965–present
HCS	Helicopter Combat Support Special Squadron	1988–present
HCT	Helicopter Combat Support Training Squadron	1974–1977
HM	Helicopter Mine Countermeasures Squadron	1971–present
HS	Helicopter Antisubmarine Squadron	1951–present
HSL	Helicopter Antisubmarine Squadron (Light)	1972–present
HT	Helicopter Training Squadron	1960–present
HTU	Helicopter Training Unit	1950–1957
HU	Helicopter Utility Squadron	1948–1965
RVAH	Reconnaissance Attack Squadron	1964–1979
RVAW	Carrier Airborne Early Warning Training Squadron	1967–1983
STAGRON	Special Air Task Force Squadron (VK)	1943–1944
TACRON	Tactical Squadron or Tactical Air Control Squadron or Tactical Control Squadron	1946–present
VA	Attack Squadron	1946–present
VA(AW)	All-Weather Attack Squadron	1956–1959
VAH or VA(H)	Heavy Attack Squadron	1955–1971
VA(HM)	Attack Mining Squadron	1956–1959
VAK	Tactical Aerial Refueling Squadron	1979–1989
VAL or VA(L)	Light Attack Squadron	1969–1972
VAP or VA(P)	Heavy Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron or Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron (Heavy) or Heavy Photographic Squadron	1956–1971
VAQ	Carrier Tactical Electronics Warfare Squadron or Tactical Electronics Warfare Squadron	1968–present
VAW	Carrier Airborne Early Warning Squadron	1948 1956–present
VAW	Carrier Tactical Electronics Warfare Squadron	1968
VB	Bombing Squadron or Light Bombing Plane Squadron	1928–1946
VBF	Bombing Fighting Squadron	1945–1946
VC	Composite Squadron	1943–1945 1948–1956
VC	Fleet Composite Squadron	1965–present
VCN	Night Composite Squadron	1946–1948
VCP	Photographic Composite Squadron	1959–1961
VCS	Cruiser Scouting Squadron	1937–1945
VD	Photographic Squadron	1943–1946
VE	Evacuation Squadron	1944–1945
VF	Combat Squadron	1922
VF	Fighting Plane Squadron or Fighting Squadron	1922–1948
VF	Fighter Squadron	1948–present
VFA	Fighter Attack Squadron	1980–1983

**U.S. NAVY SQUADRON DESIGNATIONS/ABBREVIATIONS—Continued**

<i>Acronym</i>	<i>Full Squadron Designation</i>	<i>General time-frame in use</i>
VFA	Strike Fighter Squadron	1983–present
VF(AW)	All-Weather Fighter Squadron or Fighter (All-Weather) Squadron	1956–1963
VFC	Fighter Squadron Composite	1988–present
VFN or VF(N)	Night Fighting Squadron	1944–1946
VFP or VF(P)	Light Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron or Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron or Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron (Light) or Light Photographic Squadron	1956–1987
VGF	Escort-Fighter Squadron	1942–1943
VGS	Escort-Scouting Squadron	1942–1943
VH	Rescue Squadron	1944–1946
VJ	Utility Squadron or General Utility Squadron	1925–1946
VJ	Weather Squadron or Weather Reconnaissance Squadron	1952–1953
VJ	Photographic Squadron	1952–1956
VK	Special Air Task Force Squadron (STAGRON)	1943–1944
VN	Training Squadron	1927–1947
VO	Spotting Squadron	1922
VO	Observation Plane Squadron or Observation Squadron	1923–1945
		1947–1949
		1967–1968
VOC	Composite Spotting Squadron	1944–1945
VOF	Observation Fighter Squadron	1942–1945
VOS	Air Spotting Squadron or Observation Spotter Squadron	1944
VP	Seaplane Patrol Squadron	1922
VP	Patrol Squadron	1924–1944
		1946
		1948–present
VP-AM	Amphibian Patrol Squadron	1946–1948
VPB	Patrol Bombing Squadron	1944–1946
VP-HL	Heavy Patrol Squadron (landplane)	1946–1948
VP-HS	Heavy Seaplane Patrol Squadron	1946–1948
VPM	Meteorological Squadron	1946–1947
VP-ML	Medium Patrol Squadron (landplane)	1946–1948
VP-MS	Medium Patrol Squadron (seaplane)	1946–1948
VPP or VP(P)	Photographic Squadron or Patrol Squadron (photographic)	1946–1948
VPU	Patrol Squadron Special Unit	1982–present
VPW	Weather Reconnaissance Squadron	1945–1948
VPW	Air Early Warning Squadron	1948
VQ	Electronic Countermeasures Squadron	1955–1960
VQ	Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron	1961–present
VR	Transport Squadron or Air Transport Squadron or Fleet Logistic Air Squadron	1942–1958
VR	Fleet Tactical Support Squadron	1958–1976
VR	Fleet Logistics Support Squadron	1976–present
VRC or VR(C)	Fleet Tactical Support Squadron	1960–1976
VRC	Fleet Logistics Support Squadron	1976–present
VRE	Air Transport Evacuation Squadron	1945

**U.S. NAVY SQUADRON DESIGNATIONS/ABBREVIATIONS—Continued**

<i>Acronym</i>	<i>Full Squadron Designation</i>	<i>General time-frame in use</i>
VRF	Transport Ferry and Service Squadron	1943–1946
VRF	Air Ferry Transport Squadron or Air Ferry Squadron	1943–1948
VRF or VR(F)	Aircraft Ferry Squadron	1957–1986
VRJ	Utility Transport Squadron	1945–1946
VRS	Air Ferry Service Squadron or Ferry Command Service Squadron	1943–1946
VRU	Transport Utility Squadron	1946–1948
VS	Scouting Plane Squadron or Scouting Squadron	1922–1946
VS	Antisubmarine Squadron or Air Antisubmarine Squadron or Carrier Air Antisubmarine Squadron	1950–1993
VS	Sea Control Squadron	1993–present
VSF	Antisubmarine Fighter Squadron	1965–1973
VT	Torpedo & Bombing Plane Squadron or Torpedo & Bombing Squadron	1922–1930
VT	Torpedo Plane Squadron	1921
VT	Torpedo Squadron	1930–1946
VT	Training Squadron	1960–present
VTN	Night Torpedo Squadron	1944–1946
VU	Utility Squadron	1946–1965
VW	Air Early Warning Squadron or Airborne Early Warning Squadron or Fleet Early Warning Squadron	1952–1971
VW	Weather Reconnaissance Squadron or Fleet Weather Reconnaissance Squadron	1967–1975
VX	Experimental Squadron	1927–circa 1943
VX	Experimental and Development Squadron or Operational Development Squadron or Air Operational Development Squadron or Air Development Squadron	1946–1968
VX	Air Test and Evaluation Squadron	1969–present
VXE	Antarctic Development Squadron	1969–present
VXN	Oceanographic Development Squadron	1969–1993
XVF	Experimental Development Squadron	1945–1946
XVJ	Experimental Utility Squadron	1945–1946
ZJ	Blimp Utility Squadron	1944–1945
ZK	Kite Balloon Squadron	1922–1924
ZKN	Kite Balloon Training Squadron	*
ZKO	Kite Balloon Observation Squadron	*
ZNN	Non-rigid Airship Training Squadron	*
ZNO	Non-rigid Airship Observation Squadron	*
ZNP	Non-rigid Airship Patrol Squadron	*
ZNS	Non-rigid Airship Scouting Squadron	*
ZP	Airship Patrol Squadron	1942–1961
ZP	Blimp Squadron	1942–1961
ZP	Airship Patrol Squadron (All-Weather Antisubmarine) or Airship Squadron or LTA Patrol Squadron	1942–1961
ZRN	Rigid Airship Training Squadron	*
ZRP	Rigid Airship Patrol Squadron	*

**U.S. NAVY SQUADRON DESIGNATIONS/ABBREVIATIONS—Continued**

<i>Acronym</i>	<i>Full Squadron Designation</i>	<i>General time-frame in use</i>
ZRS	Rigid Airship Scouting Squadron	*
ZS	Airship Antisubmarine Squadron	*
ZW	Airship Early Warning Squadron	1956–1961
ZX	Airship Operational Development Squadron or Airship Development Squadron	1950–1957

\* These squadron designations were developed, however, the Navy never established any squadrons using the designations.

**MARINE CORPS SQUADRON DESIGNATIONS/ABBREVIATIONS**

In 1924 the letter "M" was adopted to differentiate Marine Corps squadrons from Navy squadrons. The following is a list of Marine Corps squadron designations:

<i>Acronym</i>	<i>Full Squadron Designation</i>	<i>General time-frame in use</i>
AES	Marine Aircraft Engineering Squadron	1941–circa 1980
AWS	Marine Air Warning Squadron	1943–1954
H&HS	Marine Headquarters & Headquarters Squadron	1971–present
HMA	Marine Helicopter Attack	1971–1983
HMH	Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron	1962–present
HMHT	Marine Heavy Helicopter Training Squadron	1968–1972
HML	Marine Light Helicopter Squadron	1968–1986
HMLA	Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron	1986–present
HMM	Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron	1962–present
HMMT	Marine Medium Helicopter Training Squadron	1966–1972
HMR	Marine Helicopter Transport Squadron	1951–1956
HMR(C)	Marine Helicopter Reconnaissance Squadron	1958–1960
HMR(L)	Marine Helicopter Transport Squadron (light)	1956–1962
HMR(M)	Marine Helicopter Transport Squadron (medium)	1957–1962
H&MS	Marine Headquarters & Maintenance Squadron	1954–1988
HMT	Marine Helicopter Training Squadron	1972–present
HMX	Marine Helicopter Squadron	1947–present
MALS	Marine Aviation Logistics Squadron	1988–present
MOTS	Marine Operational Training Squadron	1943–1944
SOMS	Station Operation and Maintenance Squadron (Marine)	1982–present
VMA	Marine Attack Squadron	1951–present
VMA(AW)	Marine All-Weather Attack Squadron	1965–present
VMAQ	Marine Tactical Electronics Warfare Squadron	1975–present
VMAT	Marine Attack Training Squadron	1951–1958
VMAT(AW)	Marine All-Weather Attack Training Squadron	1968–1986
VMB	Marine Bomber Squadron	1937–1946
VMBF	Marine Fighter/Bomber Squadron	1944–1946
VMCJ	Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron	1955–1975
VMD	Marine Photographic Squadron	1942–1946
VMF	Marine Fighter Squadron	1937–circa 1975
VMFA	Marine Fighter Attack Squadron	1963–present
VMFAT	Marine Fighter Attack Training Squadron	1968–present
VMF(AW)	Marine All-Weather Fighter Squadron	1948–present

**MARINE CORPS SQUADRON DESIGNATIONS/ABBREVIATIONS—Continued**

<i>Acronym</i>	<i>Full Squadron Designation</i>	<i>General time-frame in use</i>
VMF(N)	Marine Night Fighter Squadron	1942–1958
VMFP	Marine Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron	1975–1990
VMFT	Marine Fighter Training Squadron	1951–present
VMFT(AW)	Marine All-Weather Fighter Training Squadron	1955–1958
VMFT(N)	Marine Night Fighter Training Squadron	1951–1958
VMGR	Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron	1962–present
VMGRT	Marine Aerial Refueling Transport Training Squadron	1986–present
VMIT	Marine Instrument Training Squadron	1951–1958
VMJ	Marine Utility Squadron	1945–1952
VMJ	Marine Photographic Squadron	1952–1955
VML	Marine Glider Squadron	1942–1943
VMO	Marine Observation Squadron	1941–1993
VMP	Marine Photographic Squadron	1946–1949
VMR	Marine Transport Squadron	1944–1962
VMS	Marine Scouting Squadron	1937–1944
VMSB	Marine Scout Bombing Squadron	1941–1946
VMT	Marine Training Squadron	1947–present
VMTB	Marine Torpedo Bomber Squadron	1943–1946



*Photograph shows the tail code and insignia used by Patrol Squadron P-3 Orion aircraft.*



*Photographs show the tail codes and insignia used by Patrol Squadron P-3 Orion aircraft.*